Chapter 6
Coaching Novices - Patience and Fundamentals
by Rich Davis

Introduction

A coach of novices needs two attributes: patience and a thorough knowledge of the fundamentals of rowing. Coaching rowing fundamentals will be covered extensively in this article; patience comes naturally to a few and can be developed through experience and time and will be touched on briefly. When my novices seem to be learning ever so slowly, I try to remember a chubby, clumsy boy who began rowing in the St. Paul’s School program a few years ago, developed into a varsity stroke, and rowed in the 1988 Olympic men’s eight. You might videotape your novices on their first days of rowing and again as the season ends. Play that back at the beginning of the next season to remind yourself of how much they learned and how incompetent they looked as the beginners you were coaching during their first days. Patience comes with time and experience, but it is a quality worth developing.

Visualizing the Stroke

Most athletes come to rowing with little knowledge of the sport. They may have chosen rowing because a friend rows or the shells they saw looked neat. Some may have seen crews rowing before, but they generally have little comprehension of rowing technique. Before novices begin to row, they should be shown rowing being done well. Watching varsity boats row by, viewing videotapes of national teams, or watching experienced oarsmen or oarswomen or the coach on an ergometer is an important first step in learning to row.

When Steve Gladstone began coaching at Brown, he decided that he wanted Brown oarsmen to row the style of the national team. He made film loops available for the oarsmen to see the style. (Steve began coaching in the old days before video was invented.) After a week on the water, Steve noticed that one of his oarsmen was picking up the new style much more quickly than the others. Steve asked the oarsman why he was able to alter his style so quickly. The oarsman said that each day before practice while he was stretching, he watched the loops. Better visualization leads to a faster change in technique and is an important first step in learning to row.
Demonstrating the Stroke

After showing novices proper rowing, you should demonstrate and explain the stroke. Either row yourself or have an experienced rower row in a tank, on an ergometer, in a rowing box, or in a boat alongside the dock. Explain the various parts of the stroke, explain the terms used in rowing, and the steps you will take in teaching them proper technique. Then have the novices move into a tank or onto ergometers, or the barge, or whatever stationary, on-land or next-to-the-dock rowing arrangement you have. The best, I think, is a rowing machine because you have simplified what has to be done by eliminating the difficulty of bladework. The groups should be small so that you can watch each person carefully and spend considerable time with individuals in these beginning sessions. You need to be able to physically alter their rowing positions by being able to put your hands on the new rowers to help them change quickly and easily without lengthy explanations. Remember, not only will they not know what to do, they also will not understand the terms you are using.

Holding the Oar

Proper grip of the oar handle is essential to good rowing and an important first lesson. Have the novices place their outside hands at the end of the handle with the pinkie finger at the edge of the handle. The inside hand should be two hand-widths away from the outside hand, giving the rower the ability to finish comfortably. Explain why you are telling them to row in certain ways. These explanations lead novices to think more about what they are doing and, eventually, to be in charge of their own learning. The knuckles should be fully forward with the fingers wrapped around the leading edge of the oar handle. (See the drawing below and Peter Raymond’s “Hands and Handles,” Mike Vespoli’s “Hold on to Your Oar - Correctly,” and Bill Mahoney’s “Common Mistakes” in Rowing Fundamentals: a Manual For Coaches, edited by John Ferriss).

![Figure 1 - Holding the Sweep Oar](image-url)
Typically novices use the oldest equipment in the boathouse. The oars assigned to new rowers usually have handles that are not only too large for the youngest and smallest people rowing, but also for the biggest hands in the program. For people with small or normal hands, these handles need to be shaved down. Handles that are too big make it impossible to hold the oar properly and to feather and square correctly. Large handles are also often the cause of tendonitis.

Breaking Down the Stroke

Initially, breaking down the stroke into its component parts will help the novices learn faster in digestible segments. However, you should remind rowers from time to time that the stroke is a continuous motion and each part naturally flows into the next; there is no stopping point. For the novice, each part of the stroke has to be performed consciously - imagine having to consciously think again as a beginner learning to walk. Performing the whole stroke, one part after another, is more than a beginner can do until some of the rowing stroke can be performed unconsciously.

1. In a stationary rowing device, the novices should begin to row with their arms only and without feathering. Allow them to do this arm rowing on their own for a little while. Since the stroke is a natural one, some will perform quite well right away, but others will need more help. Much can be learned without direction from a coach, simply by repetition and experimentation.

2. After you have coached them on this part of the stroke for a number of strokes, and they seem to understand what they should be doing, add the swing of the back to the use of the arms. Again, some will naturally perform the sequence of arms and back well after some initial experimenting, while others will need coaching. Emphasize to the novices that the back, being stronger, will finish before the arms and should be held steady in the layback position until the hands have moved away from the body drawing the shoulders forward on the recovery. A common fault of new rower is pulling up with the shoulders (usually because they are trying hard) and as a result disconnecting the draw with the back muscles. Remind novices to draw the elbows down and alongside the body, and to finish with relaxed shoulders.

3. When the novices have indicated that they have a sufficient understanding of the relationship of the back and arms, you may want to introduce feathering (or you may wish to wait until you have added the use of the legs). The push down with the outside hand not only raises the oar out of the water, but also slows the push away from the body at the beginning of the recovery, helping prevent a sudden rush of body weight into the stern. The feathering motion with the inside hand should be simultaneously performed with the dropping of the outside hand. Many experi-
enced rower do not push down with their outside hands, relying on the feather only to extract the oar from the water. Sluggish finishes result and are very difficult to change if the rower has not learned to feather properly at the start of his or her rowing.

4. Finally, add the use of the legs. If the legs are driving properly, the shoulders will remain over the hips during the drive. If the athletes are shooting their tails or opening up with their shoulders, attention to the recovery will probably cure these faults. Controlled recovery permits a strong leg drive and proper coordination of legs, arm, and back. At this point, when the novices are using the three muscle groups without the distraction of a moving boat, it is time to begin the training of a proper recovery, the most important component of the stroke.

This training on land may take several days before you are able to move through all the parts of the stroke. However, do not stay on the land for more than three days before taking the novices out in boats. You may wish after a few days on the water to return to land training to emphasize certain points, but do not forget that balance is an important aspect of rowing technique which can only be learned on the water. During my first season of coaching a college freshman crew, the oarsmen had made considerable progress by November and were rowing well. After winter training with weights and daily workouts in a rowing tank, their technique and strength were much better than they had been in November and I expected that when we took to the water again in early March that they would row much better than when we had left the water in the fall. However, because of a winter of rowing without the need for set-up, the rock and roll of the boats was so bad that despite other improvements their rowing was worse than in November. Rowing on machines, in tanks, and in bargs eliminates the need for balance and usually leads to habits which upset the balance of the boat and are difficult to correct.

First Days on the Water

Before anyone begins to row on the water, review the water safety procedures and regulations for your body of water.

Check the stretcher positions of each person and tell them what you will be doing that day on the water. Most novices are both excited and anxious on their first outing and anything you can do to reassure them and make the new seem less unusual will help their learning and enjoyment. The best learning situation is to have a novice begin water training in a single. Usually sweep programs cannot provide this type of training for their novices. The next best boat is a coxed four.

If possible, having an experienced coxswain and at least a pair of experienced rowers will greatly facilitate the novices' learning in the first weeks. If you must use a novice coxswain with novice rowers, the cox should be trained beforehand in the commands, the rules of water traffic, and handling of the boat. The coxswain should have ridden in a coaching launch during several practices of experienced crews to see what is expected on the water. The rowers should be familiar with the cox's commands and know what to do when told to "weigh enough," "hold water," turn the boat around, and follow other commands, what number their positions are, and on what side they are rowing.

Start rowing a pair at a time. Begin with arms as they did on the land. Rowing in pairs is heavy work and they should not attempt power stroking. Emphasize technique - many novices, knowing that rowing is a strength sport, want to start rowing as hard as Olympians on the first stroke. As soon as you can, add other pairs to lighten the load for those rowing which enables them to row a more proportional stroke. Here is the superiority of the four for sweep novices - one pair is pulling less weight and only half the rowers are not rowing. For at least the first several days, you will need at least one pair setting up the boat by holding the oar handle with one hand underneath, prying the blade against the water against preventing it from rolling from side to side. Continue the same sequence of adding parts of the stroke, as you did on the land, as each part is adequately performed.

Most will find the first day exhilarating. The addition of blade-work will slow the learning and add complications to the novices' lives. As the practices continue, leaps in learning will not occur as often and some frustration may set in, for you as well as the novices. While you are critical of their rowing technique you need to praise their efforts and progress. You must make clear that criticism of their rowing is not criticism of them as people. Good humor, games, fun, and genuine respect for each person is especially critical in this phase of rowing.

You should coach one aspect at a time. Overloading the novice with a dozen corrections will slow learning. Remembering that at the beginning, a novice must think about each part of the stroke before performing it, tell the neophyte the one correction that will most improve his or her rowing. In addition to telling the novice what is wrong, tell the person how to perform the part of the stroke properly.

While you are concentrating on technique, the novices need to be building their strength and cardio-vascular endurance. Then, when they have sufficient mastery of technique to row hard, they will have the ability to do so. Neophyte rowers will come to your program with a variety of athletic backgrounds and you need to set different training goals according to their previous training.
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You might, as Peter Raymond suggests in "The Novices' First Weeks or Nipping It in the Bud" from Rowing Fundamentals by John Ferris, set an upper and lower limit for various exercises such as running so that experienced runners are stretched and non-runners are not discouraged. Of course, as they build up their muscles, stretching to overcome tightness and give them the flexibility for controlled rowing will become more and more necessary. The coach of novices should train rowers in patterns which then become routine throughout their rowing careers. Coaches should teach novices to include stretching, warm-ups, and warm-downs in every practice. The way to do this is to make them a part of every workout you conduct.

Drills

There are scores of drills to use in helping novices learn. Each coach has his or her own list of favorites and you might ask experienced coaches which drill they would suggest for the particular problem you are encountering with your novices. Whenever possible, you should explain the drill to the crew or scullers before launching, explain what the drill emphasizes, and what they should concentrate on. Videotapes showing a crew or sculler executing the drill is helpful. Once on the water, you should minimize the amount of time the athletes are sitting listening and maximize the time they are rowing or sculling.

Drills I have found particularly useful are one-stroke-at-a-time exercises which enable rowers to pause at some point. The pause allows them to concentrate on the aspect of the stroke being emphasized and to gather themselves before taking the next stroke. The pause is usually after the finish (feathering completed) or over the knees (halfway through the recovery). Drills should duplicate the normal stroke. Thus stopping over the knees the hands should be over the knees with the arms not yet fully extended, the knees held down (waiting for the hands to go by before being raised), and the back perpendicular. Pauses should not be more than just that - a pause since balance is difficult and longish breaks in rowing do the same thing infrequent peddling does on a bike - results in a loss of balance. A number of drills are explained in Rowing Fundamentals and on USRowing videotapes. After running a drill for a few minutes, return to full strokes. Through your remarks keep the crew's attention on the proper execution of the aspect you have been teaching in the drill.

Drills are useful, but can be overdone. Remember that novices may have short attention spans and they "just want to row." Nothing can replace miles and miles of rowing to teach people how to row. Keep them moving.

After a Few Weeks

At some point you will recognize that you have taught them enough individually and you need to concentrate on teaching them to row as a crew (unless, of course, you are coaching a single sculler). This is the time to teach everyone in the boat about the same aspect of the stroke. Begin with the recovery, then the catch (which is best taught as the last part of the recovery), the finish, and lastly the drive. The drive, which is an essential aspect, can be taught last because if all the other parts are performed correctly, the drive, in most cases, will be executed properly and strongly.

Tell the scullers or sweep rowers that for the next several days you will be concentrating on the recovery and describe and show them how the recovery should be performed. Then, as much as humanly possible during the practices, only coach the recovery, ignoring the thousands of other errors screaming for your attention like a siren. Next spend several days on the catch, again explaining how the catch should be executed, and showing them quick, effective catches on videotape, in the tank, or by passing, experienced crews or scullers. Again direct your coaching solely to this portion of his or her rowing and everyone rowing together working to perfect that segment of rowing. This attention by all to one segment will help bring them together as a crew.

Help!

Coaching can be a lonely job. You are usually in the launch by yourself for hours. You need to talk to other coaches when possible to compare notes and ask advice. Don't be afraid to call a former or admired coach and ask for his or her opinion (they will be flattered). Keep a log of your practices to refer back to during the season and to remind you of what you need to do next season. Keep records of miles rowed, times for pieces, erg scores, weights lifted and use these records to quantify for your charges what they have accomplished and to give you a benchmark for other seasons.

Summary

1. Keep it simple: One correction at a time, choose the fault needing attention first; break the stroke down into digestible parts; coach one aspect of the stroke at a time.
2. Establish the right mental image. Use pictures, diagrams, videotapes, experienced rowers.
3. Miles make rowers. Be sure they are rowing much more than you are talking. Because the stroke is a natural motion, the repetition of rowing will teach the novices much. To some degree, they will learn by trial and error. Not everything they learn needs to come from the coach's mouth.
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4. **Honey attracts more bees than vinegar.** Be supportive, positive, and complimentary.

5. **Keep records and a log if nothing else, for the next season, to remind your of how much progress your rowers have made.**

6. **Help your novices develop the habits they will need for continuous progress:** strength and endurance training; flexibility training; warm-up and warm-down routines.

Coaching novices is the most difficult coaching, requires the best coaches, and can be the most rewarding of all coaching. What you teach those new to the sport will stay with them throughout their rowing.